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THE MASTER

HAROLD F. BARBER

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BY

HAROLD F. BARBER

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul."

—Henley

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SUCH a dear little wife as he had! Every day since their marriage three years before, he had realized anew his good fortune, always with increasing ecstasy. She contributed to his comfort, to his prosperity, to his every dream and hope.

Then came the child, a cooing, happy girl-baby. She grew into a golden-haired ray of sunshine, and life was a continuous example of what heaven may be, if all our dreams are realized.

He lacked nothing. His cup was quite full. Although he was not rich in this world's goods, the love in which he lived so enfolded his every thought and act, that nothing else seemed to matter much. He was a skilled man at the office, doing his work well, and joying in the pleasure which good work well done brings to him who has a contented mind; but his real life began when he left his desk to take his journey homeward to the waiting dear ones.

Two chubby arms flung about his neck in greeting marked the opening of his day, which drew to its close with the wife's good-bye kiss in the morning.

His youth had been quite uneventful — he came fresh to all these wonderful days, so much alike, yet so ever new and strange. He did not know that so much happiness was in the world for any man, and

could scarce believe his blessedness. All that the words "Home," "Wife," "Child," could mean, they meant to him. He thought little of the future, and none of the past; why dwell in the valley when the mountain-top was his?

He often said that such a life was too good to last — that Fate, the grim tyrant, would not allow any man such bliss for long.

THE horror came suddenly — almost without warning his wife sickened in a night and was taken on the third day.

He cried out — he was stunned — with numb brain he saw all happiness vanish, all sweetness turn to bitterness. Where was ecstasy, now was only grief. Every action, every scene of the home tore him with the knowledge that his life had been made desolate forever.

In agony he clasped the child to him, burying his face against the golden locks to hide his tears. The child must not realize the horror that had come to her young life so early. No! He must hide that as much as possible — he must, in spite of all, do what he could to spare the child. He must be both father and mother now.

And so, gradually, he came to live for the little one. He found he could crowd down some of his despair into a feverish effort to be everything to her who carried her mother's eyes and gentle ways.

Now all his thoughts, his plans, his work, were for the girl. She should grow up into such a maiden as never was before; she should lack nothing; she must be wise and full of health; she must give forth cheer and blessing wherever she might be; and she must have always a friend

and chum in her father, who loved the mother and the babe in one body.

And so he began to work for, to live in, the future — *her* future. He thought not of the past — he dared not — nor of the present, which was only a promise of what was to come. He recked little of self, but found himself joying once more in the unfolding of his child into maidenhood.

People said, "How happy he is with his little girl!"

THE girl was twelve years old when she began to droop, and in spite of all the flaming fierceness of his love, nothing availed. She lingered for some months, and then died.

He had gaily faced life as a knight of old on his charger; the horse that bore him had been cut down, and he had fared on afoot, trusting in his sword and shield—and now these were wrested away, leaving him defenceless before the grim enemy of man's happiness.

There was no single thing left. Nothing. No outlook but a desert waste as far as he could see; and his strength, his courage, was gone. The universe had no meaning, no aim, no hope.

When he came home at night to the empty house which cried out with its barrenness, he would light his pipe and sit for hours, his aching brain protesting against the futility of it all. Then he would seize passionately on some particularly sweet memory, and live over again each detail, ending with a bitter cry wrung from his soul. More and more these hours of retrospect claimed him as the dulled brain slowly awoke, and he found himself seeking quiet hours wherein he might dream his dreams.

As time wore on the biting, cruel edge of his

bitterness grew dulled, and the memories of the little girl who had been everything to him, carried him back to memories of the dear wife now dead so long. And he found that as extreme grief waned the sweetness of the past became greater and greater. He grew calmer, and instead of the rancour that had possessed his soul, he thanked his gods that he had known so many blessings. He clung to his memories with a drowning man's grasp, but with an ever increasing surety and calm confidence.

Twice had fate struck. It had taken his wife, then his child; and now, with a sort of exultation, he realized that no fate could by any means whatsoever take away his memories of sweetness and of the joys that had been his. These joys had become proof against all hell itself, so long as he should be he. Only the grave could separate him from them.

He realized that great happinesses are unstable, turning quickly into great griefs—that every height we climb means a deeper abyss awaiting us farther on—that every shining joy may be turned about to show its dark side of sorrow. As these things came to him, he smiled a little grimly. His joys now were of the mist of memory, which is all gray, having no shining form and no darker side of sorrow; but though the shimmer and shine had passed away, they were just as wonderfully formed as ever.

And so, little by little, serenity took the place of sorrow, and a calm assurance shone from his eyes. His thoughts were all of the beauty which he had known; and dwelling thus on beauty, he saw beauty everywhere about him. The world was indeed beautiful, and he lived to make it more so for his neighbors, and to help them to love more keenly this holy spirit, this comforter, everywhere abroad in the world.

His advice was sought; his kindly, serene soul was beloved; and whatever befell, he seemed to be a rock against which the waves of disappointment might beat in vain.

He lived in the past, and had learned to overcome even Death itself—for he had his memories until such time as Death should come, when he would bid him welcome with a smile, for life was complete.

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